

UNUSUAL BROWN VARIANT OF WESTERN MAGPIE IN PERTH

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The Australian Magpie (*Gymnorhina tibicen*) is found in lightly wooded country in all but the driest and wettest parts of mainland Australia and Tasmania (Storr and Johnstone (1979). This species has adapted well to urban areas, and is common in Australian cities. Australian Magpies divide broadly into two main groups – the white-backed forms and the black-backed forms, each with a number of sub-species. The Western Magpie is *G.tibicen dorsalis*, one of the white-backed sub-species, and is found only in South-Western Australia. All Australian Magpies are primarily black and white, with varying amounts of grey, especially in juveniles and females. Adult female Western Magpies are very distinctive in that the mantle (upper back) has black or dark grey feathers edged with greyish white, as can be seen in Figure 1.

In a park in my suburb of Greenwood (a northern suburb of Perth, Western Australia) there is a large extended family of magpies, consisting of a dominant male, two subordinate males, 27 females, and three young raised to adulthood in 2009/2010. For much of the time,

this group tends to split into 2 sub-families of 19 and 14 individuals respectively. At times the two subgroups come together, and also quite regularly there is a break-up into many much smaller groups, with some individuals foraging on their own. The group's territory covers the whole park, plus the yards of surrounding and nearby homes. There is a remarkable lack of aggression between all these individuals, both towards each other, and towards humans and dogs, even at magpie breeding time.

In October 2009 I noticed a female with one juvenile of approximately three-quarter adult size feeding on the ground in the south-western corner of the park, away from the rest of the group. The juvenile was very unusual in that the plumage was brown and white, and did not exhibit any grey or black. I spotted these two birds many times over the next few weeks, always in the same location, and never in the company of the rest of the group. The possibility had to be considered that the unusually coloured juvenile might have been rejected by the group, and that the mother was isolating it in order to protect it.

In late November, however, I spotted the mother and juvenile feeding on the ground with an adult male and five adult females in a location further east along the south side of the park, and there was clearly no aggression toward the brown and white variant magpie. Acceptance by the group was confirmed in the next few weeks when I observed the brown variant and its mother gradually extending their range, and flying with the rest of the group to forage in the park, and front yards south of the park. The mother and juvenile continued to extend their range of activity into 2010, and became active throughout the full range of this family group. Figure 2 was taken in January 2010. The brown variant was foraging in the front yard of a home opposite the park, in the company of its mother and about 10 other magpies from the family group. It can be seen that the juvenile has brown and white plumage, with no black or grey plumage at all. The patterning is very similar to that of a normal juvenile magpie, with brown more or less replacing black and grey. There is not a lot of variation in the shade of brown, and the breast is slightly mottled. There are paler feathers on the back of the neck and upper back, and white areas on the wing and rump, with white colouration extending over the first third or so of the upper tail. Adult magpies have brownish red eyes – the brown variant has the typical brown eyes of a

juvenile magpie, although somewhat lighter in colour than those of other juveniles. Figure 3 shows it perched near to a normally coloured young magpie. This picture shows the very pale plumage on the underside. The beak is paler than the beak of the other youngster, and uniformly pale.

It can be seen from Figures 5 and 6 that there have been significant changes in the appearance of the brown variant in the period between January and April. The beak has developed a darker tip, more like the adult beak as in Figure 1. While the eye is still brown, it has darkened in colour. Darker brown feathers are appearing on the face, and there are also darker brown wing and tail feathers beginning to emerge. The back of the neck and the upper back are beginning to develop quite complex markings (Figure 5). The back of the head changes from white to pale grey to darker grey, and then greyish dark brown. These feathers show some pale edging in the neck area, then slight pale edging on some of the mantle feathers, with a white spot at the distal apex of the feather. This looks like a modified version of the Western Magpie markings as seen in the normal adult female in Figure 1.

Figure 6 shows that the sides of the brown variant are still pale brown, while the neck has darkened underneath. The development of grey feathers can be clearly seen on the upper neck,



Figures: 1. Normal Adult Female Western Magpie. **2.** Brown and White Variant Juvenile in Front Yard. January 2010. **3.** Brown Variant Roosting near one of the other young Magpies. January 2010. **4.** Brown variant extending its wing to show the very pale flight feathers. **5.** Brown variant as a Sub-Adult. **6.** Brown variant in April 2010

along with the paler edging. The white rump is clearly visible. More changes in plumage can be expected in coming years. Male sub-adult Australian Magpies have plumage similar to the females, and it is not possible to determine the sex of the brown variant at this stage. Adult male Western Magpies take about 4 years to develop their full adult plumage (Storr and Johnstone, 1979). Both adult males and females of the Western Magpie continue to change their appearance as they get older. The males gradually develop more white in the tail, and older females start to lose the white edging on their backs as they get older, and it may disappear completely in old birds (Slater, Slater and Slater, 2004). It is clear that the unusual and attractive brown variant will continue to change in appearance throughout its life.

Fully white colour morphs in the Western Magpie have been observed in the past, and a fully black magpie has been reported in one of the Eastern States of Australia. A photo of another brown and white magpie has been published on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation website in the "Photos" section by Grant Harrison, and the sighting was made in the latter half of 2009 near Kangarilla, 41 km from Adelaide. This location is within the described range of the Magpie sub-species *G. tibicen telonocua*, another of the white-backed sub-species of Magpie (see Simpson and Day, 2004). The

males of all the white-backed races are very similar in their markings, and the photo by Harrison appears to be of an adult male, with brown replacing black. There is no obvious grey colouration present in any of the feathers

In the period between the beginning of March and mid-April 2010 the young adult brown variant was driven away by its mother and became independent, foraging freely on its own or with members of the family group. Unfortunately it seemed to have suffered an injury to its right wing at this time (see Figure 5) and had a "lazy" wing, however this did not seem to affect its flying abilities, and it flew as strongly as the other members of the group. With the mother no longer protecting this young adult, there was some aggressive behaviour towards it, particularly from the adult males, and this bird was increasingly foraging on its own, or on the outside of the group at this time. It seems likely that the wing damage was caused by another magpie.

The brown variant formed a liaison with another young magpie for a short period, but this ceased. On the 27th of April 2010, the day before completion of this article, I observed the brown variant foraging in the close company of three females and an adult male, with no aggression toward the variant being displayed. On the morning of the 28th, I again observed the

brown variant foraging peacefully with an adult male and three females, in a different area of the park. Perhaps this was the beginning of a new sub-group. It is surmised that previous minor aggression towards the brown variant may have been part of the normal magpie group process of dominance confirmation and pecking order establishment, as opposed to a rejection of a visually unusual individual, and that the aggression will continue to settle down more over time. I am not aware of any other information being available on social interactions between other magpie colour variants and their family groups, and I will continue to observe developments with great interest.

REFERENCES

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- AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING CORPORATION WEBSITE: www.abc.net.au

Update 1: September 2010 – the sub-group of 5 individuals including the brown variant had left the park and presumably moved to establish their own territory elsewhere

Update 2: November 2011 – the original brown variant has not been sighted again, however on several occasions I have observed a new brown variant in a nearby park, one block from the original park. This bird is three-quarters grown, and is developing adult plumage. It was first observed on the ground being fed by an adult male. The family group comprises one adult male and a small number of females, all normally coloured.

Update 3: January 2012 – the new brown variant has not been sighted since December 2011.